

The State: Its Nature, Object and Destination

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon

1849

Contents

Preface	3
I. Of the nature of the State	4
II. Of the end or object of the State	8
III. Of an ulterior destiny of the State	11

Preface

The Revolution of February raised two leading questions: one economic, the question of labor and property; the other political, the question of government or the State.

On the first of these questions the socialistic democracy is substantially in accord. They admit that it is not a question of the seizure and division of property, or even of its repurchase. Neither is it a question of dishonorably levying additional taxes on the wealthy and property-holding classes, which, while violating the principle of property recognized in the constitution, would serve only to overturn the general economy and aggravate the situation of the proletariat. The economic reform consists, on the one hand, in opening usurious credit to competition and thereby causing capital to lose its income,—in other words, in identifying, in every citizen to the same degree, the capacity of the laborer and that of the capitalist; on the other hand, in abolishing the whole system of existing taxes, which fall only on the laborer and the poor man, and replacing them all by a single tax on capital, as an insurance premium.

By these two great reforms social economy is reconstructed from top to bottom, commercial and industrial relations are inverted, and the profits, now assured to the capitalist, return to the laborer. Competition, now anarchical and subversive, becomes emulative and fruitful; markets no longer being wanting, the workingman and employer, intimately connected, have nothing more to fear from stagnation or suspension. A new order is established upon the old institutions abolished or regenerated.

On this point the revolutionary course is laid out; the meaning of the movement is known. Whatever modification may appear in practice, the reform will be effected according to these principles and on these bases; the Revolution has no other issue. The economic problem, then, may be considered solved.

It is far from being the same with the political problem,—that is, with the disposal to be made in the future, of government and the State. On this point the question is not even stated; it has not been recognized by the public conscience and the intelligence of the masses. The economic Revolution being accomplished, as we have just seen, can government, the State, continue to exist? Ought it to continue to exist? This no one, either in democracy or out of it, dares to call in question; and yet it is the problem which, if we would escape new catastrophes, must next be solved.

We affirm, then, and as yet we are alone in affirming, that with the economic Revolution, no longer in dispute, the State must entirely disappear; that this disappearance of the State is the necessary consequence of the organization of credit and the reform of taxation; that, as an effect of this double innovation government becomes first useless and then impossible; that in this respect it is in the same category with feudal property, lending at interest, absolute and constitutional monarchy, judicial institutions, etc., all of which have served in the education of liberty, but which fall and vanish when liberty has arrived at its fullness. Others, on the contrary, in the front ranks of whom we distinguish Louis Blanc and Pierre Leroux, maintain that, after the economic revolution, it is necessary to continue the State, but in an organized form, furnishing however, as yet no principle or plan for its organization. For them the political question, instead of being annihilated by identification with the economic question always subsists, they favor an extension of the prerogatives of the State, of power, of authority, of government. They change names only; for example, instead of master-State they say servant-State, as if a change of words sufficed to transform things! Above this system of government, about which nothing is known,

hovers a system of religion whose dogma is equally unknown, whose ritual is unknown, whose object, on earth and in heaven, is unknown.

This, then is the question which at present divides the socialistic democracy, now in accord, or nearly so, on other matters: Must the State continue to exist after the question of labor and capital shall be practically solved? In other words, shall we always have, as we have had hitherto, a political constitution apart from the social constitution?

We reply in the negative. We maintain that, capital and labor once identified, society exists by itself, and has no further need of government. We are, therefore, as we have more than once announced, anarchists. Anarchy is the condition of existence of adult society, as hierarchy is the condition of primitive society. There is a continual progress in human society from hierarchy to anarchy.

Louis Blanc and Pierre Leroux affirm the contrary. In addition to their capacity of socialists they retain that of politicians; they are men of government and authority, statesmen.

To settle the difference, we have, then, to consider the State, no longer from the point of view of the old society, which naturally and necessarily produced it, and which approaches its end, but from the point of view of the new society, which is, or must be, the result of the two fundamental and correlative reforms of credit and taxation.

Now if we prove that, from this last point of view, the State, considered in its nature rests on a thoroughly false hypothesis; that, in the second place, considered in its object, the State finds no excuse for its existence save in a second hypothesis, equally false; that, finally, considered in the reasons for its continuance, the State again can appeal only to an hypothesis as false as the two others,—these three points cleared up, the question will be settled, the State will be regarded as a superfluous, and consequently harmful and impossible, thing; government will be a contradiction.

Let us proceed at once with the analysis.

I. Of the nature of the State

“What is the State?” asks Louis Blanc.

And he replies:—

“The State, under monarchical rule, is the power of one man, the tyranny of a single individual.

“The State, under oligarchical rule, is the power of a small number of men, the tyranny of a few.

“The State, under aristocratic rule, is the power of a class, the tyranny of many.

“The State, under anarchical rule is the power of the first comer who happens to be the most intelligent and the strongest; it is the tyranny of chaos.

“The State, under democratic rule, is the power of all the people, served by their elect, it is the reign of liberty.”

Of the twenty-five or thirty thousand readers of Louis Blanc, perhaps there are not ten to whom this definition of the State did not seem conclusive, and who do not repeat, after the master: The State is the power of one, of a few, of many, of all, or of the first comer, according as the word State is prefaced by one of these other adjectives,—monarchical, oligarchical, aristocratic, democratic, or anarchical. The delegates of the Luxembourg—who think themselves robbed, it seems, when any one allows himself to hold an opinion different from theirs on the meaning and tendencies

of the Revolution of February—in a letter that has been made public, have done me the honor to inform me that they regard Louis Blanc's answer as quite triumphant, and that I can say nothing in reply. It would seem that none of the citizen-delegates ever have studied Greek. Otherwise, they would have seen that their master and friend, Louis Blanc, instead of defining the State, has only translated into French the Greek words *monos*, one; *aligoi*, a few; *aristoï*, the great; *démos*, the people; and the privative *a*, which means no. It is by the use of these qualifying terms that Aristotle has distinguished the various forms of the State, which is designated by the word *archê*, authority, government, State. We ask pardon of our readers, but it is not our fault if the political science of the Luxembourg does not go beyond etymology.

And mark the artifice! Louis Blanc, in his translation, only had to use the word tyranny four times, tyranny of one, tyranny of many, etc., and to avoid it once, power of the people, served by their elect, to win applause. Every state save the democratic, according to Louis Blanc, is tyranny. Anarchy especially receives a peculiar treatment; it is the power of the first comer who happens to be the most intelligent and the strongest; it is the tyranny of chaos. What a monster must be this first comer, who, first comer that he is, nevertheless happens to be the most intelligent and the strongest, and who exercises his tyranny in chaos! After that who could prefer anarchy to this charming government of all the people, served so well, as we know, by their elect? How overwhelming it is, to be sure! at the first blow we find ourselves flat on the ground. O rhetorician! thank God for having created for your express benefit, in the nineteenth century, such stupidity as that of your so-called delegates of the working classes; otherwise you would have perished under a storm of hisses the first time you touched a pen.

What is the State? This question must be answered. The list of the various forms of the State, which Louis Blanc, after Aristotle, has prepared, has taught us nothing. As for Pierre Leroux, it is not worth while to interrogate him; he would tell us that the question is inconsiderate; that the State has always existed; that it always will exist,—the final reason of conservatives and old women.

The State is the EXTERNAL constitution of the social power.

By this external constitution of its power and sovereignty, the people does not govern itself; now one individual, now several, by a title either elective or hereditary, are charged with governing it, with managing its affairs, with negotiating and compromising in its name; in a word, with performing all the acts of a father of a family, a guardian, a manager, or a proxy, furnished with a general, absolute, and irrevocable power of attorney.

This external constitution of the collective power, to which the Greeks gave the name *archê*, sovereignty, authority, government, rests then on this hypothesis: that a people, that the collective being which we call society, cannot govern itself, think, act, express itself, unaided, like beings endowed with individual personality; that, to do these things, it must be represented by one or more individuals, who, by any title whatever, are regarded as custodians of the will of the people, and its agents. According to this hypothesis, it is impossible for the collective power, which belongs essentially to the mass, to express itself and act directly, without the mediation of organs expressly established and, so to speak, posted ad hoc. It seems, we say,—and this is the explanation of the constitution of the State in all its varieties and forms,—that the collective being, society, existing only in the mind, cannot make itself felt save through monarchical incarnation, aristocratic usurpation, or democratic mandate; consequently, that all special and personal manifestation is forbidden it.

Now it is precisely this conception of the collective being, of its life, its action, its unity, its individuality, its personality,—for society is a person, understand! just as entire humanity is a person,—it is this conception of the collective human being that we deny today; and it is for that reason that we deny the State also, that we deny government, that we exclude from society, when economically revolutionized, every constitution of the popular power, either without or within the mass, by hereditary royalty, feudal institution, or democratic delegation.

We affirm, on the contrary, that the people, that society, that the mass, can and ought to govern itself by itself; to think, act, rise, and halt, like a man; to manifest itself, in fine, in its physical, intellectual, and moral individuality, without the aid of all these spokesmen, who formerly were despots, who now are aristocrats, who from time to time have been pretended delegates, fawners on or servants of the crowd, and whom we call plainly and simply popular agitators, demagogues.

In short:

We deny government and the State, because we affirm that which the founders of States have never believed in, the personality and autonomy of the masses.

We affirm further that every constitution of the State has no other object than to lead society to this condition of autonomy; that the different forms of the State, from absolute monarchy to representative democracy, are all only middle terms, illogical and unstable positions, serving one after another as transitions or steps to liberty, and forming the rounds of the political ladder upon which societies mount to self-consciousness and self-possession.

We affirm, finally, that this anarchy, which expresses, as we now see, the highest degree of liberty and order at which humanity can arrive, is the true formula of the Republic, the goal towards which the Revolution or February urges us; so that between the Republic and the government, between universal suffrage and the State, there is a contradiction.

These systematic affirmations we establish in two ways: first, by the historical and negative method, demonstrating that no establishment of authority, no organization of the collective force from without, is henceforth possible for us. This demonstration we commenced in the “Confessions of a Revolutionist,” in reciting the fall of all the governments which have succeeded one another in France for sixty years, discovering the cause of their abolition, and in the last place signaling the exhaustion and death of authority in the corrupted reign of Louis Philippe, in the inert dictatorship of the provisional government, and in the insignificant presidency of General Cavaignac and Louis Bonaparte.

We prove our thesis, in the second place, by explaining how, through the economic reform, through industrial solidarity and the organization of universal suffrage, the people passes from spontaneity to reflection and consciousness; act, no longer from impulse and enthusiasm, but with design; maintains itself without masters and servants, without delegates as without aristocrats, absolutely as would an individual. Thus, the conception of person, the idea of the me, becomes extended and generalized; as there is an individual person or me, so there is a collective person or me; in the one case as in the other will, actions, soul, spirit, life, unknown in their principle, inconceivable in their essence, result from the animating and vital fact of organization. The psychology of nations and of humanity, like the psychology of man, becomes a possible science. It was this demonstration that we referred to in our publications on circulation and credit as well as in the fourteenth chapter of the manifesto of “La Voix du Peuple” relative to the constitution.

So, when Louis Blanc and Pierre Leroux assume the position of defenders of the State,—that is, of the external constitution of the public power,—they only reproduce, in a varied form peculiar to themselves which they have not yet made known, that old fiction of representative govern-

ment, whose integral formula, whose completest expression, is still the constitutional monarchy. Did we, then, accomplish the Revolution of February in order to attain this retrogressive contradiction?

It seems to us—what do you say, readers?—that the question begins to exhibit itself in a somewhat clearer light; that the weak-minded, after what we have just said, will be able to form an idea of the State; that they will understand how republicans can inquire if it is indispensable, after an economic revolution which changes all social relations, to maintain, to please the vanity of pretended statesmen, and at a cost of two thousand millions per annum, this parasitic organ called government. And the honorable delegates of the Luxembourg, who, being seated in the arm-chairs of the peerage, therefore think themselves politicians, and claim so courageously an exclusive understanding of the Revolution, doubtless will fear no longer that we, in our capacity of the most intelligent and the strongest, after having abolished government, as useless and too costly, may establish the tyranny of chaos. We deny the State and the government; we affirm in the same breath the autonomy of the people and its majority. How can we be upholders of tyranny, aspirants for the ministry, competitors of Louis Blanc and Pierre Leroux?

In truth, we do not understand the logic of our adversaries. They accept a principle without troubling themselves about its consequences; they approve, for example, the equality of taxation which the tax on capital realizes; they adopt popular, mutual, and gratuitous credit, for all these terms are synonymous; they cheer at the dethronement of capital and the emancipation of labor; then, when it remains to draw the anti-governmental conclusions from these premises, they protest, they continue to talk of politics and government, without inquiring whether government is compatible with industrial liberty and equality; whether there is a possibility of a political science, when there is a necessity for an economic science! Property they attack without scruple, in spite of its venerable antiquity; but they bow before power like church-wardens before the holy sacrament. Government is to them the necessary and immutable a priori, the principle of principles, the eternal archeus.

Certainly, we do not offer our affirmations as proofs; we know, as well as any one, on what conditions a proposition is demonstrated. We only say that, before proceeding to a new constitution of the State, we must inquire whether, in view of the economic reforms which the Revolution imposes upon us, the State itself should not be abolished; whether this end of political institutions does not result from the meaning and bearing of economic reform. We ask whether, in fact, after the explosion of February, after the establishment of universal suffrage, the declaration of the omnipotence of the masses, and the henceforth inevitable subordination of power to the popular will, any government whatever is still possible, whether a government would not be placed perpetually in the alternative either of submissively following the blind and contradictory injunctions of the multitude, or of intentionally deceiving it, as the provisional government has done, as demagogues in all ages have done. We ask, at least, which of the various attributes of the State should be retained and strengthened, which abolished. For, should we find, as may still be expected, that, of all the present attributes of the State, not one can survive the economic reform, it would be quite necessary to admit, on the strength of this negative demonstration that, in the new condition of society, the State is nothing, can be nothing; in short, that the only way to organize democratic government is to abolish government,

Instead of this positive, practical, realistic analysis of the revolutionary movement, what course do our pretended apostles take? They go to consult Lycurgus, Plato, Orpheus, and all the mythological oracles; they interrogate the ancient legends; they appeal to remotest antiquity for the

solution of problems exclusively modern, and then give us for answer the whimsical illuminations of their brain.

Once more: is this the science of society and of the Revolution which must, at first sight, solve all problems; a science essentially practical and immediately applicable; a science eminently traditional doubtless, but above all thoroughly progressive, in which progress takes place through the systematic negation of tradition itself?

II. Of the end or object of the State

We have just seen that the idea of the State, considered in its nature, rests entirely on an hypothesis which is at least doubtful,—that of the impersonality and the physical, intellectual, and moral inertia of the masses. We shall now prove that this same idea of the State, considered in its object, rests on another hypothesis, still more improbable than the first,—that of the permanence of antagonism in humanity, an hypothesis which is itself a consequence of the primitive dogma of the fall or of original sin.

We continue to quote “Le Nouveau Monde:”

“What would happen,” asks Louis Blanc, “if we should leave the most intelligent or the strongest to place obstacles in the way of the development of the faculties of one who is less strong or less intelligent? Liberty would be destroyed.

“How prevent this crime? By interposing between oppressor and oppressed the whole power of the people.

“If James oppresses Peter, shall the thirty-four millions of men of whom French society is composed run all at once to protect Peter, to maintain liberty? To pretend such a thing would be buffoonery.

“How then shall society intervene?

“Through those whom it has chosen to REPRESENT it for this purpose.

“But these REPRESENTATIVES of society, these servants of the people, who are they? The State.

“Then the State is only society itself, acting as society, to prevent—what?—oppression; to maintain—what?—liberty.”

That is clear. The State is a REPRESENTATION of society, externally organized to protect the weak against the strong; in other words, to preserve peace between disputants and maintain order. Louis Blanc has not gone, far, as we see, to find the object of the State. It can be traced from Grotius, Justinian, Cicero, etc., in all the authors who ever have written on public right. It is the Orphic tradition related by Horace:—

Sylvestres homines sacer interpresque deorum.

Cædibus et victu fædo deterruit Orpheus,

Dictus ob hoc lenire tigres rabidosque leones,

Dictus et Amphion, Thebanæ conditor arcis,

Saxa movere sono testudinis, et prece blanda

Ducere quo vellet...

“The divine Orpheus, the interpreter of the gods, called men from the depths of the forests and filled them with a horror of murder and of human flesh. Consequently it was said of him that

he tamed lions and tigers, as later it was said of Amphion, founder of Thebes, that he moved the stones by the sound of his lyre, and led them whither he wished by the charm of his prayer.”

Socialism, we know, does not require with certain people great efforts of the imagination. They imitate, flatly enough, the old mythologies; they copy Catholicism, while declaiming against it; they ape power, which they lust after; then they shout with all their strength: Liberty, Equality, Fraternity; and the circle is complete. One passes for a revelator, a reformer, a democratic and social restorer, one is named as a candidate for the ministry of progress,—nay, even for the dictatorship of the Republic!

So, by the confession of Louis Blanc, power is born of barbarism; its organization bears witness to a state of ferocity and violence among primitive men,—an effect of the utter absence of commerce and industry. To this savagism the State had to put an end by opposing to the force of each individual a superior force capable, in the absence of any other argument, of restraining his will. The constitution of the State supposes, then, as we have just said, a profound social antagonism, *homo homini lupus*. Louis Blanc himself says this when, after having divided men into the strong and the weak, disputing with each other like wild beasts for their food, he interposes between them, as a mediator, the State.

Then the State would be useless; the State would lack an object as well as a motive; the State would have to take itself away,—if there should come a day when, from any cause whatever, society should contain neither strong nor weak,—that is, when the inequality of physical and intellectual powers could not be a cause of robbery and oppression, independently of the protection, more fictitious than real by the way, of the State.

Now, this is precisely the thesis that we maintain today.

The power that tempers morals, that gradually substitutes the rule of right for the rule of force, that establishes security, that creates step by step liberty and equality, is, in a much higher degree than religion and the State, labor; first, the labor of commerce and industry; next, science, which spiritualizes it; in the last analysis, art, its immortal flower. Religion by its promises and its threats, the State by its tribunals and its armies, gave to the sentiment of justice, which was too weak among primitive men, the only sanction intelligible to savage minds. For us, whom industry, science, literature, art, have corrupted, as Jean Jacques said, this sanction lies elsewhere; we find it in the division of property, in the machinery of industry, in the growth of luxury, in the overruling desire for well-being,—a desire which imposes upon all a necessity of labor. After the barbarism of the early ages, after the price of caste and the feudal constitution of primitive society, a last element of slavery still remained,—capital. Capital having lost its way, the laborer—that is, the merchant, the mechanic, the farmer, the savant, the artist—no longer needs protection; his protection is his talent, his knowledge is his industry. After the dethronement of capital, the continuance of the State, far from protecting liberty, can only compromise liberty.

He has a sorry idea of the human race—of its essence, its perfectibility, its destiny—who conceive it as an agglomeration of individuals necessarily exposed, by the inequality of physical and intellectual forces, to the constant danger of reciprocal spoliation or the tyranny of a few. Such an idea is a proof of the most retrogressive philosophy; it belongs to those days of barbarism when the absence of the true elements of social order left to the genius of the legislator no method of action save that of force; when the supremacy of a pacifying and avenging power appeared to all as the just consequence of a previous degradation and an original stain. To give our whole thought, we regard political and judicial institutions as the exoteric and concrete formula of the myth of the fall, the mystery of redemption, and the sacrament of penitence. It is curious to see

pretended socialists, enemies or rivals of Church and State, copying all that they blaspheme,—the representative system in politics, the dogma of the fall in religion.

Since they talk so much of doctrine, we frankly declare that such is not ours.

In our view, the moral condition of society is modified and ameliorated at the same rate as its economic condition. The morality of a wild, ignorant, and idle people is one thing; that of an industrious and artistic people another: consequently, the social guarantees that prevail among the former are quite different from those that prevail among the latter. In a society transformed, almost unconsciously, by its economic development, there is no longer either strong or weak; there are only laborers whose faculties and means incessantly tend, through industrial solidarity and the guarantee of circulation, to become equalized. In vain, to assure the right and the duty of each, does the imagination go back to that idea of authority and government which attests the profound despair of souls long terrified by the police and the priesthood: the simplest examination of the attributes of the State suffices to demonstrate that, if inequality of fortunes, oppression, robbery, and misery are not our eternal inheritance, the first leprosy to be eradicated, after capitalistic exploitation, the first plague to be wiped out, is the State.

See, in fact, budget in hand, what the State is.

The State is the army. Reformer, do you need an army to defend you? If so, your idea of public security is Cæsar's and Napoleon's. You are not a republican; you are a despot.

The State is the police; city police, rural police, police of the waters and forests. Reformer, do you need police? Then your idea of order is Fouché's, Gisquet's, Carussidière's, and M. Carlier's. You are not a democrat, you are a spy.

The State is the whole judicial system; justices of the peace, tribunals of first instance, courts of appeal, court of cassation, high court, tribunals of experts, commercial tribunals, council of prefects, State council, councils of war. Reformer, do you need all this judiciary? Then your idea of justice is M. Baroche's, M. Dupin's, and Perrin Dandin's. You are not a socialist; you are a red-tapist.

The State is the treasury, the budget. Reformer, you do not desire the abolition of taxation? Then your idea of public wealth is M. Thiers's who thinks that the largest budgets are the best. You are not an organizer of labor; you are an exciseman.

The State is the custom-house. Reformer, do you need, for the protection of national labor, differential duties and toll-houses? Then your idea of commerce and circulation is M. Fould's and M. Rothschild's. You are not an apostle of fraternity; you are a Jew.

The State is the public debt, the mint, the sinking fund, the savings-banks, etc. Reformer, are these the foundation of your science? Then your idea of social economy is that of MM. Humann, Lacave-Laplagne, Garnier-Pagès, Passy, Duclerc, and the "Man with Forty Crowns." You are a Turcaret.

The State—but we must stop. There is nothing, absolutely nothing, in the State, from the top of the hierarchy to its foot, which is not an abuse to be reformed, a parasite to be exterminated, an instrument of tyranny to be destroyed. And you talk to us of maintaining the State, of extending the functions of the State, of increasing the power of the State! Go to, you are not a revolutionist; for the true revolutionist is essentially a simplifier and a liberal. You are a mystifier, a juggler; you are a marplot.

III. Of an ulterior destiny of the State

There arises in favor of the State a last hypothesis. The fact that the State, say the pseudo-democrats, hitherto has performed only a rôle of parasitism and tyranny is no reason for denying it a nobler and more humane destiny. The State is destined to become the principal organ of production, consumption, and circulation; the initiator of liberty and equality.

For liberty and equality are the State.

Credit is the State.

Commerce, agriculture, and manufactures are the State.

Canals, railroads, mines, insurance companies, as well as tobacco-shops and post-offices, are the State.

Public education is the State.

The State, in fine, dropping its negative attributes to clothe itself with positive ones, must change from the oppressor, parasite, and conservative it ever has been into an organizer, producer, and servant. That would be feudalism regenerated, the hierarchy of industrial associations, organized and graded according to a potent formula the secret of which Pierre Leroux still hides from our sight.

Thus, the organizers of the State suppose—for in all this they only go from supposition to supposition—that the State can change its nature, turn itself around, so to speak; from Satan become an archangel; and, after having lived for centuries by blood and slaughter like a wild beast, feed upon plants with the deer, and give suck to the lambs. Such is the teaching of Louis Blanc and Pierre Leroux; such, as we said long ago, is the whole secret of socialism.

“We love the tutelary, generous, devoted government, taking as its motto those profound words of the gospel, ‘Whosoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be the servant of all;’ and we hate the deprived, corrupting, oppressive government, making the people its prey. We admire it representing the generous and living portion of humanity; we abhor it when it represents the cadaverous portion. We revolt against the insolence, usurpation, and robbery involved in the idea of the MASTER-STATE; and we applaud that which is touching, fruitful, and noble in the idea of the SERVANT-STATE. Or better: there is a belief which we hold a thousand times dearer than life,—our belief in the approaching and final TRANSFORMATION of power. That is the triumphant passage from the old world to the new. All the government. of Europe rest today on the idea of the MASTER-STATE; but they are dancing desperately the dance of the dead.”—“Le Nouveau Monde,” November 16, 1849.

Pierre Leroux is a thorough believer in these ideas. What he wishes, what he teaches, and what he calls for is a regeneration of the State,—he has not told us yet whereby and by whom this regeneration should be effected,—just as he wishes and calls for a regeneration of Christianity without, as yet, having stated his dogma and given his credo.

We believe, in opposition to Pierre Leroux and Louis Blanc, that the theory of the tutelary, generous, devoted, productive, initiative, organizing, liberal and progressive State is a utopia, a pure illusion of their intellectual vision. Pierre Leroux and Louis Blanc seem to us like a man who, standing above a mirror and seeing his image reversed, should pretend that this image must become a reality some day and replace (pardon us the expression) his natural person.

This is what separates us from these two men, whose talents and services, whatever they may say, we have never dreamed of denying, but whose stubborn hallucination we deplore. We do not believe in the SERVANT-STATE: to us it is a flat contradiction.

Servant and master, when applied to the State, are synonymous terms; just as more and less, when applied to equality, are identical terms. The proprietor, by interest on capital, demands more than equality; communism, by the formula, to each according to his needs, allows less than equality: always inequality; and that is why we are neither a communist nor a proprietor. Likewise, whoever says master-State says usurpation of the public power; whoever says servant-State says delegation of the public power: always an alienation of this power, always a power, always an external, arbitrary authority instead of the immanent, inalienable, untransferable authority of citizens; always more or less than liberty. It is for this reason that we are opposed to the State.

Further, to leave metaphysics and return to the field of experience, here is what we have to say to Louis Blanc and Pierre Leroux.

You pretend and affirm that the State, that the government, can, and ought to be, wholly changed in its principle, in its essence, in its action, in its relations with citizens, as well as in its results that thus the State, a bankrupt and a counterfeiter, should be the sole source of credit; that for so many centuries an enemy of knowledge, and at the present moment still hostile to primary instruction and the liberty of the press, it is its business to officially provide for the instruction of citizens; that, after having left commerce, industry, agriculture, and all the machinery of wealth to develop themselves without its aid, often even in spite of its resistance, it belongs to it to take the initiative in the whole field of labor as in the world of ideas; that, in fine, the eternal enemy of liberty, it yet ought, not to leave liberty to itself, but to create and direct liberty. It is this marvelous transformation of the State that constitutes, in your opinion, the present Revolution.

There lies upon you, then, the twofold obligation: first, of establishing the truth of your hypothesis by showing its traditional legitimacy, exhibiting its historical titles, and developing its philosophy; in the second place, of applying it in practice.

Now, it appears already that both theory and practice, in your hypothesis, formally contradict the idea itself, and the facts of the past, and the most authentic tendencies of humanity.

Your theory, we say, involves a contradiction in its terms, since it pretends to make liberty a creation of the State, while the State, on the contrary, is to be a creation of liberty. In fact, if the State imposes itself upon my will, the State is master; I am not free; the theory is undermined.

It contradicts the facts of the past, since it is certain, as you yourselves admit, that everything that has been produced within the sphere of human activity of a positive, good, and beautiful character, was the product of liberty exclusively, acting independently of the State, and almost always in opposition to the State; which leads directly to this proposition, which ruins your system, that liberty is sufficient unto itself and does not need the State.

Finally, your theory contradicts the manifest tendencies of civilization; since, instead of continually adding to individual liberty and dignity by making every human soul, according to Kant's precept, a pattern of entire humanity, one face of the collective soul, you subordinate the private person to the public person; you submit the individual to the group; you absorb the citizen in the State.

It is for you to remove all these contradictions by a principle superior to liberty and to the State. We, who simply deny the State; who, resolutely, following the line of liberty, remain faithful to the revolutionary practice,—it is not for us to demonstrate to you the falsity of your hypothesis; we await your proofs. The master-State is lost; you are with us in admitting it. As for the servant-State, we do not know what it may be; we distrust it as supreme hypocrisy. The servant-State seems to us quite the same thing as a servant-mistress; we do not wish it; with our present light, we prefer to espouse Liberty in legitimate marriage. Explain, then, if you can, why, after

having demolished the State through love of this adored liberty, we must now, in consequence of the same love, return to the State. Until you have solved this problem, we shall continue to protest against all government, all authority, all power; we shall maintain, through all and against all, the prerogative of liberty. We shall say to you: Liberty is, for us, a thing gained; now, you know the rule of law: *Melior est conditio possidentis*. Produce your titles to the reorganization of government; otherwise, no government!

To sum up:

The State is the external constitution of the social power.

The constitution supposes, in principle, that society is a creature of the mind, destitute of spontaneity, providence, unity, needing for its action to be fictitiously represented by one or more elected or hereditary commissioners: an hypothesis the falsity of which the economic development of society and the organization of universal suffrage agree in demonstrating.

The constitution of the State supposes further, as to its object, that antagonism or a state of war is the essential and irrevocable condition of humanity, a condition which necessitates, between the weak and the strong, the intervention of a coercive power to put an end to their struggles by universal oppression. We maintain that, in this respect, the mission of the State is ended; that, by the division of labor, industrial solidarity, the desire for well-being, and the equal distribution of capital and taxation, liberty and justice obtain surer guarantees than any that ever were afforded them by religion and the State.

As for utilitarian transformation of the State, we consider it as a utopia contradicted at once by governmental tradition, and the revolutionary tendency, and the spirit of the henceforth admitted economic reforms. In any case, we say that to liberty alone it would belong to reorganize power, which is equivalent at present to the complete exclusion of power.

As a result, either no social revolution, or no more government; such is our solution of the political problem.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)

Anti-Copyright



Pierre-Joseph Proudhon

The State: Its Nature, Object and Destination

1849

Retrieved on 29 November, 2018 from <https://www.panarchy.org/proudhon/state.html>

A section of Proudhon's *Resistance to the Revolution*. Here Proudhon presents his critical remarks against the positions of state socialists, like Louis Blanc and Pierre Leroux, who were under the illusion that the State-Master can be magically transformed by them into the State-Servant, at the service of all the people. Unfortunately this illusion has spread wide and large and it is still with us; like all illusions, it needs to be dismantled if we want to become free, rational and responsible human beings. The text has been translated by Benjamin R. Tucker, from the *Voix du Peuple* of December 3, 1849.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net